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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS #7: THE VANISHING LEFT

REF: A. A) SANTO DOMINGO 5740 (NOTAL) B) SANTO DOMINGO
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[1](#)B. C) SANTO DOMINGO 0794

[1](#)C. D) SANTO DOMINGO 4403

[1](#)D. E) SANTO DOMINGO 4916

[1](#)1. (SBU) This is #7 in our current series on politics in the Dominican Republic:

The Vanishing Left

** Despite current economic hardships, Dominicans have shown no interest at all in radical political solutions. This year's presidential election emphasized the eclipse of the left. With a total of 23 parties fielding candidates, the take of the 3 independent parties of the declared radical left fell to less than one-third of one percent of the votes.

Dominican political habits have been shaped by long habits of accommodation to caudillos, patronage disbursed by the three non-ideological major parties, and dreams of the United States. President Fernandez's Dominican Liberation Party, founded along Caribbean marxist lines in the 1970's, retains little more than a leftist lean in its market-friendly, socially conscious party line.**

Economic Frustration

Since mid-2003 Dominicans generally have absorbed the blows of rising inflation, peso devaluation, collapsing public hospitals, and periodic returns to the age before electricity. Chronic power blackouts this past summer sparked public desperation and incidents of tire burning or rock throwing in affected neighborhoods, but the unrest in the barrios evaporated after the Fernandez inauguration with a modest improvement in electricity supply (Ref A). An unexpected rebound of the peso exchange rate since President Fernandez's inauguration in August has given the middle class hope that vacations and education in the United States might again become affordable. Food prices, though high, have leveled off and merchants say they will be lowering prices soon. The new government's revelations of mismanagement and corruption in the previous administration make daily headlines, as do the prosecution of executives involved in the 2003 commercial bank collapse and concerns over a perceived "crime wave" (Ref B).

Exit, Hope, and a Jaundiced Eye

Yet no radical voices, have recently challenged the economic or political systems here, apart from a ridiculous daily half-hour radio broadcast of 1950s-style propaganda by a tiny communist faction. Some attribute this passivity to the safety valve of illegal emigration via the perilous passage to Puerto Rico. Others cite selective memories of "good times" of Fernandez's first administration and hopes that he can resuscitate the economy. And there is visceral skepticism toward all politicians and their promises, rooted in a chaotic history.

Sporadic Protests Subside

The continuing socio-economic pressures would appear to offer openings for new political forces, as would the impending disintegration of the PRSC, one of the three traditional parties. Potential maverick leaders exist, but they are on the margins of the political arena. Twice during the runup to the election, a loose coalition of community activists successfully called for national work stoppages to protest against economic conditions (Ref C). Dominican workers stayed home for the enforced holidays, regardless of the organizers' poorly articulated demands. This year doctors in public hospitals have engaged in almost continuous strikes and work stoppages, protesting their low pay and abysmal

resources to treat patients (Ref D). With a brief respite after Fernandez's inauguration, they resumed their agitation. The public sympathizes, but knows the government is broke.

Small Parties - A Slippery Slope

Although small parties abound in the Dominican Republic, none has gained prominence in decades. A few have ambitious, serious leaders who are trying to launch moderate political projects, such as Trajano Santana of the Independent Revolutionary Party (PRI), an offshoot of the mainline PRD which ran Santana as an independent candidate this year (drawing only 3,994 votes, 0.1% of the total). Such a leader, with skill, luck, and private sector funding, could conceivably gain attention and build a party to fill the partial vacuum created by the inert left and the PRSC meltdown.

Independent leftist parties sank to a new low of voter support in the May 16 presidential election. Their three candidates together drew 10,700 votes, 0.3% of the 3,613,700 votes cast. The vote for socialist or communist parties continued a long-term decline since 1982, when parties of the left tallied 26,731 votes -- 1.5% of the vote. Since then, in national elections, the left's share has remained below 1%. Force of the Revolution (FR), which in 1996 absorbed the old Dominican Communist Party, and the other two small left parties that ran candidates this year failed to attain the minimum votes required for continued recognition and public funding by the Central Election Board.

The vanishing parties did not lack visible candidates. FR ran Rafael Flores Estrella, a former PRD presidential pre-candidate, instead of craggy veteran communist leader Narciso Isa Conde. The New Alternative Party (PNA) for the second time put forward party boss Ramon Almanzar, a former activist in the "Collective of Popular Organizations," organizers of street demonstrations and work stoppages against the GODR. TV talk-show personality Raul Perez Pena ("Bacho") ran again under his Authentic Democracy Party (PAD) banner. Although the most widely known of the three, Bacho received a mere 1,838 votes (and the National Electoral Board misspelled his name on the ballots).

Patronage, Not Revolution

The left's failure to resonate with Dominicans has historical precedents. Groups such as the 14th of June Movement opposed the Trujillo dictatorship, sometimes violently, but were fighting tyranny and had little exposure to leftist ideas. Many of the young guerrillas came from the social and economic elite. Some who continued to commit violence into the early 1970s were influenced by Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution -- this included military officers who began the 1965 civil war. But elected President Joaquin Balaguer tamed nearly all of them by handing out positions in government or at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo. Traditional Dominican voters -- rural and poor -- sought to get by with a paternalistic leader like Balaguer who promised them public jobs, social programs, or personal favors. Today's urban or small-town Dominicans, when pressed by economic woes, tend to fall back on this patron-client behavior (after all, Balaguer left office only 8 years ago). They may occasionally yield to mob impulses, but they do not dream of overturning the system.

Sellout to Centrists

To get ahead, most small-party leaders suppress their ideological preferences and ally with a mainline centrist party -- PLD, PRD, or PRSC. Exploiting a major candidate's name recognition, a left-wing group can reap more votes, but to the benefit of the mainline partner. The Dominican Workers Party (PTD), allied with the PLD this year, got 24,714 votes (0.7% of the total), compared with only 6,138 in 2000 when its leader Jose Gonzalez Espinosa ran independently with support from the Communist Workers Party and another small left group. Gonzalez Espinosa and his PTD and five other parties that backed President Fernandez are getting minor jobs in his administration, with little hope of influencing policy. (As the new executive director of the Fund for Promotion of Community Initiatives, Gonzalez Espinosa found nearly all his agency's projects paralyzed for lack of funds.) The six parties helped ensure Fernandez a first-round victory, pushing his vote percentage from 49 to 57.

Leftist at Home or Abroad?

President Fernandez's Dominican Liberation Party, founded along Caribbean marxist lines in the 1970's, retains little

more than a leftist lean in its market-friendly, socially conscious party line. A few of our conservative contacts, recalling President Fernandez's reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1998, have imagined he will reach out to leftist or populist governments abroad, for example those in Cuba, Venezuela, or China. In our view, any such gestures would have minimum ideological significance and would be intended to make Dominican foreign relations appear more diverse, as well as to satisfy a residue of left-leaning PLD founders from the 1970s. But there would be no sea change.

Although Cuba and the Dominican Republic have diplomatic relations, the limited exchanges with Cuba -- of medical students, athletes, or artists -- take place through NGOs, universities or multilateral organizations, not bilaterally between the governments. Two-way trade is miniscule.

As for Venezuela, Santo Domingo needs and seeks good relations with Caracas to ensure oil deliveries from its main supplier, and to this end Fernandez has drawn on his existing friendship with President Chavez in ongoing negotiations (Ref E). Slippery operator Miguel Mejia, rumored to have connections to many renegade regimes, is a visible godfather to this deal and serves Fernandez as a Minister without Portfolio. Fernandez is likely to travel soon to Caracas to sign a deal in which Venezuela provides soft financing for 25 percent of the oil bill. But Fernandez's background and world view are very different from those of Hugo Chavez, particularly as regards the United States.

A political rapprochement with China seems unlikely, as it could jeopardize Santo Domingo's close relations with Taiwan and the substantial assistance from Taipei. There was a brief stir last May during the visit of Dominican congressmen to Taipei, when a Taiwanese legislator told the press that Senator Ramon Albuquerque (of Mejia's PRD) had commented that Fernandez might recognize the mainland. Albuquerque claimed he had been misquoted.

Fernandez's foreign policy, like that of Mejia, so far centers on relations with the United States, with some added attention to Europe and the Caribbean region as a whole.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted on our classified SIPRNET site <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/> along with extensive other material.
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